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**SOMETHING, NOTHING: SPACE, SUBSTANCE,  
AND SEXUAL IDENTITY IN SHAKESPEARE**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that early, "preoedipal" anxieties about dependency, autonomy, the boundaries of the self, the dangerous interpenetration of inner and outer worlds--the outer world contaminating the inner self, the self afraid of losing the precious "substance" that keeps it alive--play a significant role in Shakespeare's plays, specifically Hamlet and King Lear. It argues further that childhood dependence on a mother influences later feelings about the opposite sex and sexual conflicts revive early anxieties about autonomy and independence, so that the attempt to establish a proper balance between inner and outer worlds is inextricably tied (in the plays) to conceptions of sexual identity. In broader social terms, these plays reflect the problem of being (1) a separate, self-conscious individual at a time when the old values of an ordered, hierarchical society were giving way to a new, middle-class, Protestant ethic of "individualism" and (2) a man at a time when sexual roles were becoming polarized in new ways. As the plays themselves imply--and as the paper tries to show--we can't understand the dilemmas of modern "individualism" without understanding the sexual parameters (learned in early childhood, reinforced by social experience) in terms of which these dilemmas are lived out.

Something, Nothing: Space, Substance,  
and Sexual Identity in Shakespeare

Randolph Splitter

Near the end of Henry IV, Part One, Prince Hal sees Falstaff's body on the ground, apparently dead, and wonders, "Could not all this flesh / Keep in a little life?" (V.iv.101-2).<sup>1</sup> Hal has just eulogized Hotspur in terms of the same flesh/spirit dichotomy: "Ill-weaved ambition, how much art thou shrunk! / When that this body did contain a spirit, / A kingdom for it was too small a bound; / But now two paces of the vilest earth / Is room enough" (V.iv.87-91). Throughout these closing battle scenes, where everyone is literally out of breath, life itself is identified (in traditional fashion) with breath, that is, with spirit: "that no man might draw short breath today" (V.ii.48); "Stay and breathe awhile" (V.iv.46); "I saw him dead, / Breathless and bleeding on the ground" (V.iv.132-3); "I grant you I was down, and out of breath, and so was he; but we rose both at an instant" (V.iv.144-5). Falstaff himself, down-to-earth and material-minded as always, has no use for such notions as an unbounded spirit that can so easily be lost. Over Sir Walter Blunt's dead body he says, "I like not such grinning honor as Sir Walter hath. Give me life; which if I can save, so; if not, honor comes unlooked for, and there's an end" (V.iii.58-61). Or, in a more

extended commentary on the word "honor": "What is honor? A word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? Air--a trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died a Wednesday" (V.i.134-6). Since honor is merely a word, an airy abstraction, according to Falstaff, it doesn't have the necessary weight and substance to keep one alive. Fat, breathless Falstaff believes in flesh more than air, spirit, or empty rhetoric that has little relation to his own immediate needs.

But this is an overly simple description of Falstaff; if he is material-minded, he is not always literal-minded. The lies that he tells Hal in an early tavern scene increase and multiply like the ever-changing number of men he has supposedly vanquished. There is much lying, duplicity, and hiding of the truth in this play, but Falstaff's lies are so transparent--and so numerous--that they seem more like compulsive fictions than real attempts to deceive. As the prince says, "These lies are like their father that begets them--gross as a mountain, open, palpable" (II.iv.224-5). Critical comment on the play has focused on the theme of rebellious sons and patriarchal fathers, including Falstaff's own role as an undisciplined, immoral, weak-willed, childish "father" to Hal, a "misleader of youth." But this "father ruffian"--that is, the devil of the mystery plays and the Vice of the moralities--is also guilty of being simply a gross, corporeal, fat body: "a devil haunts thee in the likeness of an old fat man; a tun of man is thy companion. Why dost thou converse with that

trunk of humors, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swoll'n parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloakbag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with the pudding in his belly" (II.iv.446-54). This father is gross and palpable, stuffing himself with food and drink like a hungry baby, but the father of lies who so prolifically peoples the world with the ever-multiplying creatures of his imagination seems more like a mother of lies, producing and reproducing them out of his own fat, fertile, "pregnant" belly. The image of Falstaff as a fat old man suggests, in part, the fantasy of a mother and child merged into a single, self-sustaining, self-generating whole--pregnant, childbearing, nursing mother and fat, satisfied baby all rolled into one.<sup>2</sup> And in this imagined unity of child and mother, there is no division between self and world: "banish plump Jack, and banish all the world!" (II.iv.479-80).

Of course Falstaff has trouble living up to the wishful fantasy that he himself "embodies." He keeps fattening himself up as if to prove that he doesn't need anything more, that everything he needs is already contained within himself, but if one can no longer "keep in a little life," then one's shrunken self will in turn be swallowed by the grave: "food for powder, food for powder," says Falstaff of his scarecrow soldiers, "they'll fill a pit as well as better" (IV.ii.66-7). On this psychologically primitive level, the underlying message is eat or be eaten: Falstaff tries to encompass the whole world, but Hal, afraid of the risks or simply more prudent, separates himself from it, keeps his "true" self hidden, and doesn't

let his emotions (his "inner" life) get out of control.

As in Henry IV, early, "preoedipal" anxieties about dependency, autonomy, the boundaries of the self, the dangerous interpenetration of inner and outer worlds--the outer world contaminating the inner self, the self afraid of losing the precious "substance" that keeps it alive--play a significant role in Shakespeare's mature tragedies. There too, more obviously than in Henry IV, the attempt to establish a proper balance between inner and outer worlds--to keep out "bad" things and hold onto "good" ones--is inextricably tied to sexuality, to one's ideas about masculinity and femininity. Early fears of losing a mother's love--and of being overly dependent on a mother, on her love--influence later feelings about the opposite sex, and sexual conflicts revive early anxieties about autonomy and independence.<sup>3</sup> The opposition between the passive, self-indulgent, "feminine" Falstaff and the self-controlled, coldly rational, aggressively masculine Hal--between a decadent knight who is always promising to repent like a proper Christian (like a good, middle-class Puritan) and a prudent, bourgeois prince who accepts old-fashioned feudal values like "honor" when they serve his purposes--is played out in the later tragedies, sometimes in a single character.

I'd like to suggest, in fact, that Hamlet and King Lear--the plays I'm going to consider in this paper--are largely about the problem of being (1) a separate, self-conscious individual at a time when the old values of an ordered, hierarchical society were giving way to a new, middle-class, Protestant ethic of "individualism" and

(2) a man at a time when sexual roles were becoming polarized in new ways.<sup>4</sup> As the plays themselves so strongly imply, we can't understand the dilemmas of "individualism"--the problem of being an individual in what will become the modern world--without understanding the sexual parameters (learned in early childhood, reinforced by social experience) in terms of which these dilemmas are lived out. The threat to masculine autonomy, to masculinity itself, is often represented, in Shakespeare's plays, by quasi-literal substances--especially, in these verbally self-conscious works, words themselves--which invade the self's "inner space" and contaminate it. Sometimes characters want to hold onto precious substances which slip through their grasp, to "keep in a little life," but, alternatively, they try to keep "foreign" substances out, to keep their inner selves pure and uncontaminated. Or, finally, they seek to "possess" purity itself, an elusive "something" or "nothing"--maybe only a word--which they attribute to women (idealized, virginal women) and yet hope, in some way, to make their own.

# I

After telling Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he considers Denmark (in fact the whole world) a prison--at least the Denmark that exists in his mind, "for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.253-4)--Hamlet exclaims: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.258-60). In other words,



his own mind is a kind of psychological prison not because it seems narrow and confining but because it is occupied by disturbing thoughts; there is no place to hide, no room to breathe freely. He would like to believe that the human mind is pure and rational, open and infinite, a microcosm of an idealized world, but his own thoughts contaminate everything: "this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, . . . a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals; and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (II.ii.306-17).

When his father's ghost admonishes Hamlet to remember him--to remember to avenge his death, as if he would otherwise be in danger of forgetting it--Hamlet imagines this obligation written down like one of the ten commandments in his troubled mind. And he calls his mind "this distracted globe" (with a pun on the Globe Theater), making it a microcosm which encompasses or encapsulates the outside world within itself. "Remember thee? / Yea, from the table of my memory / I'll wipe away all trivial fond records, / All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past / That youth and observation copied there, / And thy commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain, / Unmixed with baser matter. . . . / My tables--meet it is I set it down. . ." (I.v.97-107): he wants

to make his mind into a kind of tabula rasa, wiping the slate clean so that his father's patriarchal commandment will not be tainted by contact with any "baser matter." The problem is that his father's commandment is not a divine father's holy word, it can't be separated from all his other thoughts about fathers, mothers, and children, and (by virtue of its message of murder, adultery, and incest) it too is "base," contaminated, corrupt. In fact, the memory that Hamlet claims to inscribe in his mind is contaminated by his father's own admission of guilt: "Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away"; "Cut off even in the blossoms of my sin" (I.v.12-3, 76). This may seem like a conventional acknowledgment of human imperfection, of original sin shared by everyone, but old Hamlet's "foul crimes" are serious enough to merit unspeakably frightening punishments in purgatory: "But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood," etc., etc. (I.v.13-6).

The secrets of old Hamlet's prison house are as disturbing as those that occupy his son's prison-like mind, and in both cases the disturbing thoughts are represented as words locked inside one's mind, which one can't get rid of. Indeed, Hamlet's father's disturbing words could be said to enter Hamlet's ears (on their way to his "distracted globe") in the same way that Hamlet's father was poisoned: "And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distillment" (I.v.63-4). This is not an arbitrary association: words and ears

are bedfellows throughout Hamlet (as they are in Othello, where Iago pours poisonous words into Othello's ear). For example, the false report that a serpent stung old Hamlet poisons Denmark's "ear" in a repetition of his own actual murder: "So the whole ear of Denmark/  
Is by a forgèd process of my death/ Rankly abused" (I.v.36-8). Hamlet's mother tells him: "O, speak to me no more./ These words like daggers enter in my ears" (III.iv.95-6). And Claudius worries about the talebearers who "infect [Laertes'] ear/ With pestilent speeches of his father's death" (IV.v.90-1).<sup>5</sup>

As in Othello, the words that infect all these ears are powerful, poisonous, dangerous invaders. But Hamlet, unable to act decisively, responding to his father's command with words instead of deeds, feels that his own words are weak, ineffectual, impotent: "That I . . . / Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words/ And fall a-cursing like a very drab,/ A stallion [that is, prostitute; or scullion?]" (II.ii.595-9). His need to "unpack" his heart testifies to the emotional burden he feels he's carrying around inside him, but the surprising comparison to a whore--Claudius compares his hypocritical "painted word" to a "harlot's cheek" (III.i.51-3)--seems to mean that all his wasted, impotent emotion makes him effeminate. Perhaps even sexual passion is, in Hamlet's mind, effeminate (and whorelike) in the complicated sense that it undermines a man's rational self-control, makes him more vulnerable, more dependent on others, and exposes him to the danger of a woman's own sexual desires. "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason": in accordance with a traditional view of women, Hamlet feels that men are rational, women emotional, that

emotion in men is effeminate. In this view a woman's sexual passion is a dangerous power, while a man's desires--which put him at the mercy of a woman--make him weak and vulnerable.

Hamlet's fear of emotion takes the form of a suspicion of overt displays of feeling. At the beginning of the play he protests to his mother that his grief for his father is true and sincere, that his outward behavior accurately reflects his inner emotion: "Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.'/ . . . I have that within which passes show;/ These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (I.ii.76, 85-6). Claudius calls this grief "unmanly" (I.ii.94), but Hamlet blames his mother for not mourning enough, not because she is unemotional but because she has let base desires overcome her reason: "frailty, thy name is woman--/ . . . O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer" (I.ii.146, 150-1). After hearing one of the players give a passionate speech, pretending to feel an emotion that isn't really his, Hamlet berates himself for not feeling--and not acting out--the emotions he should feel: "What would he do/ Had he the motive and the cue for passion; That I have? . . . / Yet I,/ A dull and muddy-mettled rascal, peak/ Like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of my cause,/ And can say nothing" (II.ii. 570-2, 577-80). Though he does unpack his heart with words, he feels that he cannot say the right words, the ones that will really express the emotions inside him. By the same token, he doesn't like actors to get carried away and overplay their parts: "O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings. . . . I would have

such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant. It out-herods Herod" (III.ii.8-15). Disturbed by the false appearances of people around him--and by his own inability to play the part his emotions call for--he wants an "honest," "truthful" kind of acting in which outward show matches inner feeling: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (III.ii.18-9). The sexual ambiguity of boy actors playing women's parts--"What, my young lady and mistress? . . . Pray God your voice, like a piece of uncurrent gold, be not cracked within the ring" (II.ii.433-8)--underscores the more general point that actors can at least pretend to reveal their feelings more openly than most men (unless they're ranting and raving like Herod) are able to do.

Hamlet praises Horatio, at great length, for being steady, self-controlled, not overly emotional ("As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing"): "blest are those/ Whose blood and judgment [passion and reason] are so well commeddled/ That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger/ To sound what stop she please. Give me that man/ That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him/ In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,/ As I do thee" (III.ii.68, 70-6; cf. III.ii.372-80). A man who gives in to his own passions is at the mercy of "strumpet Fortune" (II.ii.504), a woman, but Hamlet is willing to allow another man, Horatio, into his heart's core--beneath his outward defenses, in contact with his inner feelings--just as he inscribes his father's memory in his brain. In a sense Hamlet would like to have a strong, unemotional man "inside" himself to defend him against that fickle woman "passion"; that is, he would like to be that man, so that he does not become passionate and effeminate instead.

If Hamlet links women with an inner world of emotions, he also blames women for not being what they seem, for concealing corrupt desires behind an innocent or attractive face. As he tells Ophelia: "I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (III.i.144-6). Seeing Yorick's skull in the graveyard--"Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft"--prompts him to make another diatribe against women: "Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come" (V.i.189-91, 193-6). Hamlet is appalled that human beings end up as dust and dirt--"To what base uses we may return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till 'a find it stopping a bung-hole?" (V.i.204-6)--but why should death be a warning (a warning against sexual desire) to women more than men? For one thing, the idea that the dust or dirt of a man's decayed body will wind up filling a hole (V.i.206,214,216) implies an association between women, sexuality, castration, and death. If sexual relations with a woman are confused with childhood dependence on a mother, the sexual act of stopping up a hole may seem to carry with it the deathlike danger of being lost in the open, empty, gravelike space within a woman's body.

On the other hand, if childhood dependence creates a sense of identification with one's mother, that imagined interior may come to be identified with a different inner space, the symbolic, psychological space of the self. In the terms of this identification, the sexual violation of a woman's body may be equated with the contamination of a man's mind by poisons poured into the ear, sexual thoughts,

bad dreams, disturbing words, all the "baser matter" that Hamlet would like to wipe away. Thus "bestial oblivion," instead of being a danger, may be a way of avoiding the emotional turmoil that comes from "thinking too precisely on th' event" (IV.iv.40-1), a man may wish "that this too too sullied [solid] flesh would melt" (I.ii.129)--dirty matter dissolving almost into nothing--and death may seem "a consummation/ Devoutly to be wished" (III.i.63-4), a retreat to a womblike refuge where one is safe from the dangers of the external world. That's part of the reason why soldiers "Go to their graves like beds" (IV.iv.62). Oblivion is the ultimate alternative to aggressive action, the "felicity" (V.ii.348) that Hamlet speaks of at the end of the play, but the problem is that even in death there may be no escape from bad dreams: "ay, there's the rub,/ For in that sleep of death what dreams may come/ . . . Must give us pause" (III.i.65-8). Hamlet cannot really imagine a self without guilt, a mind free from disturbing thoughts, a pure, virginal, yet maternally protected self, but that is exactly what he wants.

So far I have been more or less avoiding the central issue of the play: Hamlet's psychological difficulty in avenging his father's death, in punishing the adultery/incest/murder committed by his uncle and his mother. The classic Freudian explanation of Hamlet's problem (elaborated by Ernest Jones) is oedipal: Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because, unconsciously, Hamlet would like to kill his father and marry his mother as Claudius himself has already done. Oedipal guilt leads him to identify with the man he's supposed to kill. But, as Avi Erlich points out in a recent psychoanalytic study of the play, these oedipal

feelings would more likely lead Hamlet to project his own guilt onto Claudius, punish his uncle instead of himself, and at the same time deny his antagonism toward his father by carrying out his father's wishes. Erlich argues that, far from wanting to see his father dead, Hamlet wants to have a strong, forceful, worthy father to emulate and to depend upon: Hamlet's doubts about his father--the very fact that his father is a ghost, a betrayed, murdered victim who cannot avenge himself--undermine his ability to do what his father cannot do for himself. This is a persuasive argument, one that is supported by the example of the many father-rulers in Shakespeare's other plays --including Lear, Prospero, and Duke Vincentio in Measure for Measure --who abdicate their authority, leave their "children" to fend for themselves, and yet continue to make demands upon these children. But Hamlet's doubts about his father, about masculine roles and masculine authority, cannot be separated from his even more confused and ambivalent feelings (as much preoedipal as oedipal) about his mother, about women and sexuality generally.<sup>6</sup>

The extent of Hamlet's mother's guilt is never completely clear, and the ghost makes a point of telling Hamlet not to do anything against her. As Hamlet reminds himself: "Let me be cruel, not unnatural; / I will speak daggers to her, but use none" (III.ii.403-4). It is true that his mother's betrayal of his father provokes--or at least precipitates--an explosion of hostility, on his part, against Ophelia and women in general. But just as Hamlet is not sure who is really to blame, Claudius or his mother--the double



exclamation "O most pernicious woman! / O villain, villain, smiling, damnd villain!" (I.v.105-6) makes us wonder, at least for a moment, whether the villain is Claudius or the pernicious woman herself--he blames women for making men the monsters that they are: "wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them" (III.i.140-1). The point is not just that women excite men's desires, with bad consequences, but that women, since they give birth to men, are ultimately responsible for their sins: "Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. . . . We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us" (III.i.121-4, 129-30). By the same token, Hamlet seems to be blaming men--and himself--for making their mothers suffer. If sons and mothers are partners in guilt, then it becomes difficult for Hamlet to separate his mother's guilt from his own. Addressing the king as his mother instead of his "father," he argues (as if denying the fact that his real father is dead) that mother and "father" are inseparable: "My mother--father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother (IV.iii.51-2). The unconscious logic behind this argument may be that a man and his mother are one flesh. In short, Hamlet's ambivalent, guilt-ridden anger toward his mother--inhibited by his father's contradictory messages and by his own attachment to her--may confuse the issue of vengeance, making it impossible to take action against Claudius alone.

Just as the smiling villain is, at least for a moment, sexually ambiguous, Hamlet's defensive remark to Rosencrantz about smiling betrays a similar confusion--a confusion of gender--about the real source of his unhappiness, his disappointment in the world: "Man delights not me; nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so" (II.ii.317-9). Thus, surprising as it may seem, the disturbing, villainous--hypocritical or prurient--smile that doesn't quite mask a person's inner thoughts suggests a kind of ambiguous, androgynous sexuality ("nor woman neither") which, like Yorick's grinning, chapfall'n skull, turns out to be nothing more than an empty holé in a dead body: "to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that" (V.i.196-7). One could almost say that Hamlet's "smiling, damnèd villain" was an imaginary combination of Claudius and Gertrude, an androgynous parental figure (one flesh) who seems to smile on Hamlet but is really a villain, whose smile--like a warning to Hamlet, like the Medusa's face--implies that a man's body will be reduced to nothing, to dust, in the end. And it is this ominous, androgynous smile--or the line that reminds him of it: "That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain" (I.v.108)--which Hamlet "records" in his mind.

Hamlet's father, condemning his wife's lust, tells Hamlet not to punish her; Hamlet, "identifying" too strongly with her, wants to kill her but cannot. His suicidal depression is, in part, the kind of displaced hostility that Freud described in "Mourning and Melancholia";<sup>7</sup> he is mourning the "loss" of his mother as well as

his father. Rather than killing her, he considers killing himself; abandoned by her--betraying his father, she has also betrayed him--he feels that the world, "man," and he himself are sterile and worthless, in fact already dead. Like a child caught up in his parents' quarrels, he doesn't know which parent to believe, which to blame--or if he himself is to blame. Paralyzed by contradictions, he can't act except to strike out blindly, without having a chance to think about it, as in his killing of Polonius. Even his plan for sending Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths is implemented at the last moment, "rashly": "And praised by rashness for it" (V.ii.7). He finally kills Claudius only when his mother is dead and he knows that he himself is dying. The stratagem which he employs against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, having one's enemy "Hoist with his own petar" (III.iv.208)--or as Horatio puts it, "purposes mistook / Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (V.ii.385-6)--is both a way of avoiding responsibility for their deaths and, finally, a way of avoiding responsibility for his own. The suicidal fatalism of his "readiness is all" (V.ii.223-4) speech indicates that, in fighting the duel with Laertes, he is also engineering his own death. He dismisses his anxieties as "such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman" (V.ii.216-7), but his show of manly, heroic action has the same aim and the same motive as girlish Ophelia's pathetic, "romantic" suicide over the loss of her father and her "lover."

Ironically, at the end of the play, Hamlet still hasn't said what he wanted to say, not only because there is no time left

but because he hasn't yet been able to put his deepest feelings into words: "You that look pale and tremble at this chance, / That are but mutes or audience to this act, / . . . O, I could tell you-- / But let it be" (V.ii.335-9). He has been led to believe that talking, when one should act--talking to oneself instead of dealing with others directly--is cowardly and effeminate. But all his soliloquies, his writing-down of thoughts, his "mad" and bitterly sarcastic colloquies, perhaps even his conversations with ghosts, are attempts to do what is most difficult for him: to express what he really feels, to understand what his feelings really are, to figure out why, if talking to himself makes him feel ashamed, he keeps on doing it. Hamlet's problem seems like a prototypical case of modern self-consciousness--in fact, it is--but his divided, ambivalent identifications show that "self-consciousness" is not a purely intellectual disease, that it has its origins in (culturally-conditioned) childhood feelings about the danger of giving in to one's feelings.

## II

Lear's ritualistic, fairy-tale-like division of the kingdom at the opening of the play--apportioning dowries for his daughters, in the absence of male heirs--translates parent-child relations into measurable, material, economic terms. As in Othello and The Merchant of Venice, a daughter is treated as a commodity, a valuable possession, not only because of her exchange-value on the marriage market but also because of the love she has (measured and priced) to give. Even Shylock, who in fact prefers a human bond (the pound of flesh) to a

strictly financial one, grieves for his stolen daughter as well as his stolen money. When Cordelia says, "I love your Majesty / According to my bond, no more nor less" (I.i.94-5), she is ironically echoing Portia's strategy for undoing the "bond" in the Merchant, the debt of a pound of flesh "nearest the heart": "Shed thou no blood, nor cut thou less nor more / But just a pound of flesh" (IV.i.324-5). Just as a pound of flesh would really amount to a whole life, Lear's demand for "love" is insatiable.

And when, after her two sisters have formally professed their love, Lear asks Cordelia how much she loves him, she says nothing. Or rather he asks her what she can say in order to win a rich dowry, and her answer "Nothing," which the two of them repeat like the exchanges of a catechism--"'Nothing?' / 'Nothing.' / 'Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again'" (I.i.90-2)--becomes the measure of her love. As in the motif of the three caskets in The Merchant of Venice,<sup>8</sup> the French king chooses the daughter who appears poorest, in the belief that this superficial lack of possessions corresponds to some deeper value: "Fairest Cordelia, that are most rich being poor" (I.i.252). When, later, Gloucester catches Edmund pretending to hide the phony letter he has written and asks him what he has been reading, Edmund says, "Nothing, my lord." "No?" Gloucester replies. "What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (I.ii.32-6). Again, the overt appearance of "nothing" may hide something significant underneath.

Making a surprising comparison, Lear says that one who "makes his generation messes / To gorge his appetite" (I.i.119-20) --who eats his children--would be more welcome at his "bosom" than Cordelia, but it is Lear rather than Cordelia who is making inordinate demands, who is almost "devouring" his daughter: "With my two daughters' dowers digest the third" (I.i.130). Yet he wishes he could rest content with "her kind nursery" (I.i.126). The language suggests that father-daughter relations are like an intense, ambivalent attachment between mother and infant, in which it is not clear who is the mother, who the infant, and in which each party threatens to devour the other in a desperate effort to get enough of the other's love. Cordelia's unwillingness to express her emotions--either to ask for favors or to give them--underscores Lear's own irrational desperation in demanding (so he won't have to beg for) love. "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth" (I.i.93-4), she says, recalling both Hamlet, who is wary of letting people into his heart's core, and Iago, who protests a little too much that he does not wear his heart upon his sleeve. Perhaps Lear would like to be self-controlled, self-possessed, like Cordelia, not driven by consuming needs; in any case, her unresponsiveness drives him mad with rage. When the Fool tells Lear that "thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers; for . . . thou gav'st them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches" (I.iv.176-8), he is chastising Lear for allowing a reversal of normal authority; he is doing the same thing, in a limited way, by chastising the king.

But is this generational reversal a sexual one as well: the father giving his phallic rod to his authoritarian daughter/ mothers? As is typical of Shakespeare's heroes, Lear worries that emotion is effeminate, a confession of weakness, like Albany's "milky gentleness" (I.iv.348): "let not women's weapons, water drops, / Stain my man's cheeks. . . . You think I'll weep. / No, I'll not weep. / I have full cause of weeping, but this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere I'll weep" (II.iv.276-7, 281-5). His idea of madness is that his heart (the seat of his emotions) will break--Gloucester's "flawed heart / . . . 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly" (V.iii.198-201)--or else leave its moorings altogether, rising into a region where it doesn't belong (where his emotions might become too painfully conscious): "O me, my heart, my rising heart! But down!" (II.iv.119). In other words, the heart is like the wandering womb in the traditional theory of "hysteria" (and Lear is like a woman): "O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element's below" (II.iv.55-7). The fact that the Fool interprets Lear's rising heart in masculine, phallic terms only underscores Lear's sexual conflicts: "Cry to it, Nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em i' th' paste alive. She knapped 'em o' th' coxcombs with a stick and cried, 'Down, wantons, down!'" (II.iv.120-3).

By dividing his kingdom and then giving it away, Lear has (according to the Fool) destroyed something in himself, as if his

divided kingdom, broken heart, shattered mind, and lost masculinity were all the same thing--or rather, nothing: "thou clovest thy crown i' th' middle and gav'st away both parts. . . . Thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away"; "thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle. Here comes one o' the parings"; "Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now: I am a Fool, thou art nothing" (I.iv.164-7, 191-3, 198-200).<sup>9</sup> He has given the "something" that made him a king and a man to Regan and Goneril, and now, like Cordelia, he is left with a helpless, feminine, virginal "nothing." "'Tis something, nothing," as Iago says, or, of women's honor, it is "an essence that's not seen; / They have it very oft that have it not" (III.iii.157, IV.i.17). Hamlet, asking Ophelia if he can lie in her lap, says, "Do you think I meant country matters?"

Oph.: I think nothing, my lord.

Ham.: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

Oph.: What is, my lord?

Ham.: Nothing. (III.ii.111-5)

And in King Lear, as in Hamlet, a man's heart or mind, overwhelmed by womanly emotions, is imagined as an open, womblike space.

Eyes which may weep womanly tears and which, in Gloucester's case, are plucked out--"bleeding rings" (V.iii.191)--are likewise imagined as empty, O-shaped circles signifying castration and loss. "No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse?" Lear says to Gloucester, adding: "If thou wilt weep my fortunes,



take my eyes" (IV.vi.147-8, 178). In a grotesque bit of sexual innuendo, Lear even links Gloucester's blindness with sexual flirtation: "Dost thou squiny [squint] at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love" (IV.vi.138-40). As Edgar, sounding uncharacteristically like a Calvinist preacher, tells his brother Edmund: "The gods are just . . . / The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (V.iii.172-5). Indeed, this dark and vicious place is not just the bed on which Gloucester committed adultery but the empty, O-shaped vagina/womb where Edmund was conceived, which Gloucester's "bloody rings" now grotesquely imitate.

Lear too rages bitterly about adultery--he even wonders whether his wife was guilty of it (II.iv.130-1)--but he claims to excuse it on the cynical grounds that sexual passion is universal and uncontrollable: "Adultery? / Thou shalt not die: die for adultery! No: / The wren goes to 't, and the small gilded fly / Does lecher in my sight. / Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my daughters / Got 'tween the lawful sheets" (IV.vi.112-8). Of course Gloucester's bastard son is not kind to his father, but the example of Regan and Goneril (assuming Lear is their father) seems to show that the problem--the guilty act which eventually brings misfortune on the participants--is sex, not adultery. (In Othello the adultery is imaginary, and Hamlet attacks the innocent Ophelia as if she shared his adulterous mother's guilt.) So Lear's selfish, ungrateful children are his punishment for having brought them into the world in the first place, for engaging in sex and

reproduction, whether lawful or not. And these harsh, unfeminine daughters (who treat him like a child whom they don't want to indulge any longer) illustrate the point that, even in non-sexual relations, women are harmful to men. Edgar, in the guise of poor Tom, claims he was a servant who "served the lust of my mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her" (III.iv.86-8)--his term for making the beast with two backs--as if the fault lay with the mistress who abused her authority over the dependent man. He warns Lear not to "betray thy poor heart to woman" (III.iv.96-7).

Lear's later diatribe against women is explicit: "Behold yond simp'ring dame, / Whose face between her forks presages snow" --whose pure, chaste appearance (like Desdemona's or Ophelia's) is a lie--"Down from the waist they are centaurs, / Though women all above: / But to the girdle do the gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiend's" (IV.vi.120-1, 126-9). Snow contrasts greatly with the fires of hell --"There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, / Burning, scalding, stench, consumption; fie, fie, fie! pah, pah!" (IV.vi.130-2)--but this snow suggests both a false chastity and a frigid hostility, as if a woman's passions were inconsistently hot and cold, destroying a man by fire or by ice. If the "face between her forks" is the dark, burning, foul-smelling pit--that is, if the face belongs syntactically between the forks (legs), giving it the same sort of double anatomical location as may apply to the ambiguous, androgynous smile in Hamlet--then these forks seem to emphasize the forked, split, broken quality of a woman's genitals--or of a man's heart, a man's body in general.

In Lear's words, a gloss upon Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man": "Is man no more than this? Consider him well . . . . unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" (III.iv.105-11). Just as the Fool considers him a broken, cracked crown, an O-shaped nothing, Lear now considers himself, in essence, a poor, naked body, without clothes or money or reason or the trappings of social status, "forked" like a woman, without a man's physical potency or social authority. Despite his misogynistic outbursts about the dangers of falling into the empty pit, he appropriates a woman's ambiguous "quality of nothing" as a kind of holy, ascetic poverty, a renunciation of material goods, worldly values, and (a man's) sexual desires: "Take physic, pomp; / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (III.iv.33-4). Edgar, who takes "the basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury, in contempt of man, / Brought near to beast," his face "grime[d] with filth" (II.iii.7-9), concludes: "That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am" (II.iii.21), meaning that he is no longer Edgar but also that he, Edgar, is now "nothing," which is yet "something" after all.

Gloucester's failed suicide attempt near Dover--which Edgar stages in order to "save" his father and bring him back to life--is a leap into the void which illustrates the virtues of "nothingness." Edgar's made-up description of the beach "below" seems realistically specific, but--in the light of the play's preoccupation with the dark pit where men are born and perhaps die as well--the blind man's fall

over the "extreme verge" (IV.vi.26) seems like a sexual parable. At the supposed edge of the cliff Edgar says that he would "not leap upright" (IV.vi.27), an odd way of describing a fall but an appropriate description of phallic behavior. "How fearful / And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!" (IV.vi.11-2): given Edgar's later association of eyes with the "dark and vicious place," the place may (on one level) be the same. And the image of "yond tall anchoring bark / Diminished to her cock; her cock, a buoy / Almost too small for sight" (IV.vi.18-20) suggests--in this sexual context--a diminished, boyish penis almost lost from sight, with the added ambiguity that the penis may now belong to "her." Edgar's claim that the fiend led his father to this place and the gods then saved him ironically anticipates Lear's cosmological division of a woman's body: "But to the girdle do the gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiend's." Whether the lower depths belong to the fiend or to the gods--whether women themselves are fiends or gods--is an open question in the play.

Moreover, instead of crashing into the black pit Gloucester seems to float like an insubstantial spirit: "Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air, / So many fathom down precipitating, / Thou'dst shivered like an egg: but thou dost breathe; / Hast heavy substance" (IV.vi.49-52). By becoming (in Edgar's fiction) an immaterial "nothing," divesting himself of worldly substance, Gloucester is able to leap into the larger nothing and survive; with nothing to lose, he is in no danger. Of course this "miracle" is a double illusion: Edgar stages the scene for his father but also for

us, the audience, half-convincing us that the scene he describes is real. After all, on stage, in the absence of elaborate scenery, a flat field and the ground near a steep cliff look pretty much the same, and (like Gloucester) we have to take Edgar's word that there really is water down there. Like Cordelia's word "nothing," this doubling of the ordinary dramatic illusion--this flat stage really is flat--reminds us that "nothing" is not to be taken literally, that the place of nothing is, finally, in our minds, not really at Dover at all.

The ritualistic acting-out of Gloucester's fall into nothingness parallels Lear's own renunciation of social trappings. His "Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here" is the first in a series of references to removing clothes, a progressive attempt to return to the state of poor, bare, unaccommodated man, unprotected but also free from the necessity of living up to the social roles of king and father. From "Pull off my boots" (IV.vi.175) to "Pray you, undo this button" (V.iii.311) Lear is always asking someone else to help him off with his clothes. When kind attendants change his garments while he sleeps, he is in the position of an infant being cared for by a mother (or perhaps by family servants in an aristocratic household). Clearly, Lear's renunciation of the world --"Upon such sacrifices . . . / The gods themselves throw incense" (V.iii.20-1)--is an attempt to enjoy the benefits, not just suffer the hardships, of being a little child, dependent on the mercies of nature, the gods, or Cordelia herself. (The quality of "nothing,"

in this play, has much in common with "the quality of mercy" in The Merchant of Venice.) This is what he wanted in the first place, except now he begs, humbly, instead of making demands like a headstrong tyrant: "Come, let's away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage: / When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness" (V.iii.8-11). In a sense the terrifying pit has become a protective, womblike cage which he can share with his "maternal" daughter Cordelia. And the fears of a weak, dependent infant can be wished onto his enemies: "Wipe thine eyes; / The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell, / Ere they shall make us weep. We'll see 'em starved first" (V.iii.23-5).

The breath that seems to flicker from Cordelia's dead or dying body emphasizes the idea that she is more spirit than body, that her angelic, childlike spirit is now leaving her material body behind: "Lend me a looking-glass; / If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why, then she lives"; "Look, her lips, / Look there, look there" (V.iii.263-5, 312-3). The pieta-like image of Cordelia in Lear's arms (or vice versa, as Lear might wish it) implies that the two of them might be joined in death if not in life. His heart finally and completely broken (V.iii.314), even Lear might become a spirit, an innocent "nothing": "Vex not his ghost" (V.iii.315). Indeed, all the negatives of his grief--"no, no, no life? / . . . no breath at all? . . . no more, / Never, never, never, never, never" (V.iii.307-10)--which sound like desperate appeals for her to demonstrate that she does have breath and life after all, also

underscore the value of "nothing" in Cordelia: in her, nothing is something, no life is life, never is forever. Cordelia's reticence, her lack of overt emotion, "really" signifies true love, and (in the context of all the O-shaped nothings in the play) the "nothingness" of a woman's anatomy--at least in the case of Cordelia--betokens the life-giving, life-sustaining qualities of a mother. From this point of view the phrase "Nothing will come of nothing" means exactly the opposite of what it seems.

Lear's adoption of mad, holy poverty is an attempt to imitate (and appropriate) Cordelia's precious nothingness: if he is childlike, innocent, even feminine, like her, either the gods will destroy him or she will love him. But if he begins and ends by wanting to make his daughters his mothers, what has he learned? What does the play prove? Perhaps that dependence on others' love is neither a shameful weakness nor a threat to one's "selfhood": the "symbiosis anxiety" of Hamlet--fear of merger, of losing one's "self"--gives way, in King Lear, to a confession of childish need. Of course the misogyny of Hamlet is not exorcised in this play; Lear is hysterical in his denunciations of women's sexuality, saves his affection for virginal, submissive women--Cordelia's precious "nothing" is the "essence that's not seen" (of women's virtue) by another name--and tolerates emotional intimacy only as a fantasy of mother-child "symbiosis." But perhaps his implied willingness to adopt the O-shaped "nothingness" of a woman--despite the terrifying danger of being lost in the void, in the dark and vicious place--represents a

blurring of male/female differences, a de-polarization of masculinity and femininity, which Hamlet could not accommodate.

### III

Lear's loyal friend and follower, Kent--honest as Iago is not, steady and reliable like Horatio--illustrates the way in which social crisis and psychological conflict are two sides of the same coin.<sup>10</sup> Kent is plain-speaking and direct like Cordelia--they are both, in effect, banished and disowned by Lear--although Cordelia is much more reticent, Kent more outspoken. Like Cordelia, he remains absolutely faithful to Lear, the king whom he has "Loved as my father, as my master followed" (I.i.143), despite Lear's attacks on him. But can one love a master as a father? As Kent puts it, somewhat chillingly (to modern ears): "you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master," namely, "Authority" (I.iv.28-9, 31). Moreover, his assertion that, though he is in disguise, he is exactly what he appears to be, honest and faithful--"I do profess to be no less than I seem" (I.iv.14)--follows what would seem to be the unnecessary claim that he is "A man" (I.iv.11), as if there were any doubt about it. When Lear asks him how old he is, he makes a special point of saying that he's not interested in women--"Not so young, sir, to love a woman for singing, nor so old to dote on her for anything" (I.iv.38-9)--as if a woman might get in the way of his faithful service to Lear. Having shaved his beard (it seems) in order to serve Lear in disguise, he hopes that "my good intent / May carry through itself to that full issue / For which I razed my likeness" and that "thy master



whom thou lov'st / Shall find thee full of labors" (I.iv.2-4,6-7), the words "issue" and "labors" hinting ever so slightly at the metaphor of childbirth.

Why all this ambiguity about Kent's manhood? Let's consider the incident in which, after Lear strikes Goneril's servant Oswald, Kent trips him. For this proof of loyalty Lear gives Kent some money and says, "Thou serv'st me, and I'll love thee" (I.iv.89-90), although this service seems a little beyond the call of duty. As Oswald himself explains later, not too unreasonably: "It pleased the king his master very late / To strike at me, upon his misconstruction; / When he, compact, and flattering his displeasure, / Tripped me behind; being down, insulted, railed, / And put upon him such a deal of man / That worthied him, got praises of the King / For him attempting who was self-subdued" (II.ii.118-24). Kent seems to get so angry at Oswald because he wants to prove that Oswald is the servile lackey, not he; by a display of manly violence ("such a deal of man") against the servant, he can show himself to be Lear's faithful follower and still, at the same time, a man. (Iago has to defend against a similar sense of feminine dependence on Othello.)

Kent feels that he is a gentleman serving a king, while Oswald is a knave, a mere servant, a person of a lower class: "A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave"; "That such a slave as this should wear a sword, / Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these, / Like rats, oft bite the holy cords

atwain / Which are too intrince t' unloose" (II.ii.14-6, 74-7).

True, faithful service, in Kent's sense, is a sacred, almost familial bond which does not compromise the manhood, independence, or aristocratic honor of either the master or the "servant." But Edgar's example of the servant who "served the lust of his mistress' heart" undermines this ideal, and Kent's own petulant attacks upon Oswald imply that, in a time when traditional bonds are crumbling, when new class distinctions are developing, one has to prove one's manhood, perhaps by beating up one's inferiors. Indeed, Lear's own sense of childish dependence on his daughters causes him to assert his patriarchal authority all the more.

According to the historian Lawrence Stone, the breakdown of feudal values--of extended ties of service and kinship--led to a "reinforcement of patriarchy" in the English family: "During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there took place a series of important changes in the structure of the English middle- and upper-class family. . . . Within this nuclear core . . . power flowed increasingly to the husband over the wife and to the father over the children. . . . Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe saw a breakdown of old values and sense of order. . . . The authoritarian family and the authoritarian nation state were the solutions to an intolerable sense of anxiety, and a deep yearning for order."<sup>11</sup> By the same token, this reinforcement of patriarchal values may have made it all the more difficult for individual men (both fathers and the sons of those fathers) to live up to the roles prescribed for them,

to deal with their own "childish" or "feminine" feelings, to deal with women at all. The contradiction between the rhetoric of paternal authority and the actual importance of a mother (or mother-substitute) in a child's emotional life may have exacerbated the conflict, creating an internal split (in men's minds) between "masculine" self-assertion and "childish/feminine" dependence.

Possibly because the Protestant principle of individual moral responsibility and the "bourgeois" one of economic self-interest reinforced each other, undermining traditional social ties, the middle-class English Protestant male of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries--a mixture of Prince Hal, Polonius, Iago, and Lear's Fool, with a touch of Shylock thrown in--was probably more "individualistic," more directly concerned with himself and his possessions, than his forbears. At the same time, influenced partly by their faith in patriarchal authority, partly by Calvinist religious ideas of original sin and innate depravity, sixteenth and seventeenth century parents deliberately sought to "break the will" of their children from an early age, a practice which must have undermined these children's sense of personal autonomy and left them feeling ambivalent--though not always consciously--about the authorities they were supposed to respect.<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare's plays themselves are ambivalently nostalgic about old-fashioned aristocratic values. Gloucester says that "distribution should undo excess, / And each man have enough" (IV.i.72-3), but Lear, sympathetic toward "poor naked wretches," nonetheless clings to the hope that "Our basest

beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous" (II.iv.263-4). To Regan's question of why he needs even one knight to serve him, he protests, "O reason not the need!" (II.iv.263), feeling that this rational, calculated, utilitarian measurement of human needs is dehumanizing. Portia's legalistic insistence on an exact pound of flesh is, in fact, a comparable protest against a modern, bourgeois, rationalistic attitude toward human feelings.

But Hamlet, whether he likes it or not, lives in a psychologically modern world, where reason is supposed to control emotion and where emotion (not yet controlled) leads to guilt, disgust, and self-punishing depression. Osric, a rich and pompous landowner, is (in Hamlet's words) "spacious in the possession of dirt" (V.ii.89), his possessions having no real emotional value, but Hamlet feels that his own mind is a prison because of all the "dirt," the "baser matter," that contaminates it; in modern man, the dirt is necessarily internalized. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas has suggested, "dirt" itself is a relative, negative concept, comprising anything which does not fit into the written or unwritten rules of a cultural system.<sup>13</sup> On the individual level, the concept of dirt (contamination, pollution, poison, disease) may apply to anything which, in the prevailing cultural terms, is felt as alien or threatening to the self. The ancient Greeks understood guilt as an almost literal pollution, the blood that had to be washed off or the offending individual who had to be banished from the city, cast outside the moral/psychological boundaries of the body politic. In

Shakespeare's Protestant, middle-class culture, guilt is much more internalized and de-literalized; it can't simply be washed off (not that this worked for the Greeks either). And yet Hamlet feels disgusted at himself and the world largely because his thoughts and feelings seem like disturbing foreign elements that have violated and contaminated his "inner" self. He is bothered less by a specific, clear-cut sense of moral guilt than by a confused feeling of contamination. In a corrupt, materialistic, guilty world, Lear seeks to find innocence, value, and life itself in "nothing"--a kind of Hegelian negation of the original negation, dirt--as if any bodily, material, or worldly "something" had to be contaminated from the very start. For that matter, since this "nothing" implies "something" about women, perhaps even about a woman's body, it cannot be completely free from the contaminating, guilty emotions that Shakespeare's heroes are always trying to exorcise.

In historical terms, the Shakespearean revulsion against women and sexuality is a culturally-defined response--influenced by a combination of factors including an ideology of patriarchal authority, a (theoretical) split between reason and emotion, mind and body, a polarization of social roles for men and women, and a prevailing religious attitude (especially Puritan) against bodily needs and desires--to the underlying problem, especially for men, of childhood dependence on women.<sup>14</sup> Whether Elizabethan mothering was particularly inconsistent, ambivalent, or inadequate--to help provoke such revulsion against women in Jacobean men--I cannot say, except

that the practice (among "landed, upper bourgeois and professional" families) of sending out infants to poor, underfed, underpaid, and unreliable wet-nurses may have left children with a deep sense of insecurity about primary emotional attachments. And even if the relationship with a wet-nurse was warm, loving, and continuous, the sons of the higher classes may have grown up feeling that--as in the case of the Victorian nanny--women were divided into two separate groups: physical, sexual women of the poorer classes and distant, unloving, anti-sexual women like one's mother.<sup>15</sup> "These nurses," Stone points out, "were often cruel and neglectful, and they often ran out of milk, as a result of which the baby had to be passed from nipple to nipple, from one unloving mother-substitute to another. If the infant stayed with one wet-nurse, then it became deeply attached to her, as a result of which the weaning process at about eighteen months inflicted the trauma of final separation from the loved substitute mother-figure and a return to the alien and frightening world of the natural mother."<sup>16</sup>

Presumably Shakespeare's own childhood did not include the worst features of Elizabethan family life, or he wouldn't have been able to write the plays that he did.<sup>17</sup> But the polarization between the "feminine" fantasy-world of early childhood and the officially patriarchal society (seen as adult reality) was a problem for all children of the time.<sup>18</sup> The greater the polarization between these two worlds--in different historical periods, different cultures, or different families--the greater the difficulty in developing and

maintaining a reasonably secure sense of self: hence repression, guilt, the projection of guilt onto innocent victims, depression, fear of dependence on and attachment to others, conflicting identifications, inner divisions, "dirt" and "poison" everywhere. If Hamlet, in his morbid introspection, his emotional paralysis, and his "feminine" ambivalence toward manly heroics, has seemed (for the last two hundred years at least) like Shakespeare's most "modern" character, it may be because--more middle-class schoolboy than prince --he shows us the mixed blessings of "individualism" in the bourgeois, post-feudal world that we call modern, a world in which self-sufficiency, self-assertion, and even self-denial are considered masculine virtues and dependence on others--economic or emotional--is a failing, a sign of childish, feminine weakness.

## NOTES

1. References are to The Signet Classic Shakespeare texts of the plays, general ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: New American Library, 1963). The context should indicate which play is being referred to.
2. See Norman N. Holland, Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 209.
3. My emphasis on early, "preoedipal" issues of dependency and autonomy follows what I consider to be one of the most fruitful poet-Freudian developments in psychoanalytic theory: the "object relations" approach of British analysts such as D. W. Winnicott (in, for example, Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis (New York: Basic Books, 1975), esp. "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," pp. 229-42) and the accompanying focus on mother-infant relations in the work of John Bowlby (Attachment and Loss, 3 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1969, 1973, 1980)). A good summary of object relations theory--in contrast to Freud's own quasi-biological emphasis on libidinal drives and autoerotic bodily zones--may be found in Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 57-73. Chodorow's book stresses the connection (which I am also making) between early



childhood experience, especially dependence on a mother, and adult sexual identity. On this question see also Robert J. Stoller, "Symbiosis Anxiety and the Development of Masculinity," Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred (New York: Dell, 1975), pp. 135-62.

On the development of individualism, see: Max Weber's classic The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York: Scribner's, 1958); C. B. Macpherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962); Louis Dumont, From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977); Alan Macfarlane, The Origins of English Individualism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Fred Weinstein and Gerald M. Platt, The Wish to be Free: Society, Psyche, and Value Change (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). I am not saying that "individualism" was necessarily tied to Protestantism, but Protestantism was a major factor in the Anglo-American context. Macfarlane argues (on p. 196) that "it is no longer possible to 'explain' the origins of English individualism in terms of either Protestantism, population change, the development of a market economy at the end of the middle ages, or the other factors [usually] suggested. . . . Individualism, however defined, predates sixteenth-century changes and can be said to shape them all." Perhaps so, but it is

possible that the precise causal explanation that Macfarlane seems to be looking for can never be found, that this kind of causality is an inappropriate way of explaining historical change.

5. On the idea of language as a drug or poison, with sexual overtones, see Jacques Derrida, "La Pharmacie de Platon," La dissémination (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 69-197. See also Ernest Jones, "The Madonna's Conception Through the Ear," Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis (London: The International Psycho-Analytical Press, 1923), pp. 261-359.
6. Ernest Jones, in Hamlet and Oedipus (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1954), considers Hamlet's ambivalent feelings toward his mother essentially in the oedipal context of his relationship with his father. Avi Erlich, in Hamlet's Absent Father (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), tends to maintain this emphasis despite his reinterpretation of Hamlet's oedipal motives. David Leverenz, however, emphasizes Hamlet's identification with women in "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View," in Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 110-28. Erlich's book, although it is frequently reductive in its search for unconscious meanings, is also thorough, intelligent, and provocative. As will be seen a little later in

this paper, I generally agree with his argument (on pp. 70-2 & 280-6) that the "smiling villain" has sexual connotations, but I consider the smile to be a sign of sexual ambiguity and disguise rather than just a punishment (castration) that Hamlet wishes upon his enemies.

7. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, trans. & ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XIV, 243-58.
8. Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," Standard Edition, XII, 291-301.
9. See David Willbern's excellent article on "Shakespeare's Nothing," in Representing Shakespeare, pp. 244-63. See also Samuel Abrams and Leonard Shengold, "The Meaning of 'Nothing': (I) A Note on 'Nothing,' (II) More About the Meaning of 'Nothing,'" Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 43 (1974), 115-9, and Sigurd Burckhardt, "King Lear: The Quality of Nothing," Shakespearean Meanings (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 237-59.
10. On the social conflicts exemplified in King Lear, see Paul Delany, "King Lear and the Decline of Feudalism," PMLA, 92, 3 (May 1977), 429-40.

11. Lawrence Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800 (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 216-7.
12. See Philip Greven, The Protestant Temperament (New York: Knopf, 1977) and Stone, pp. 101-2.
13. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (New York: Praeger, 1966).
14. For an analysis of this kind of sexual polarization in a contemporary social context, see Nancy Chodorow, "The Sexual Sociology of Adult Life," The Reproduction of Mothering, pp. 173-90.
15. Cf. Freud, "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men" and "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," Standard Edition, XI, 165-90.
16. Stone, p. 100. The earlier quotation in this paragraph is from p. 107.
17. Cf. David Leverenz, "Why Did Puritans Hate Stage Plays?," The Language of Puritan Feeling: An Exploration in Literature, Psychology, and Social History (New Brunswick, N.J.; Rutgers University Press, 1980), pp. 23-40.

18. For a theoretical analysis of the interrelations between family and society, particularly the modern bourgeois family, see Mark Poster, Critical Theory of the Family (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), esp. pp. 166-205.